



Meeting of Doctors in the [Medieval University](#) of Paris

## Education and State Power

From the time of the origins of the modern Universities about nine hundred years ago in Medieval Europe, a Doctor has been a person who has a licence to teach. At the beginning, the universal (Catholic) Church awarded the doctorates. Later, the universities became more autonomous, but at the same time more clearly part of the

State, integrated with its bureaucracy, and inseparable from it in class terms. Napoleonic France codified the matter in 1808 by instituting the *doctorat d'État* (Doctorate of the State) as a monopoly.

Today, in South Africa, there is state control over education. The Minister of Higher Education and Training, Doctor Blade Nzimande, is a communist. He is also the General Secretary of the SACP.

The Communist University, however, is outside of this fold, unrecognised, and unsupported. It is a “school for life” in the sense of that term used by N F S Grundtvig and the Danish folk-high-schools. The CU requires no entry qualification, and it awards no certificates or degrees. It has no recognised Doctors. Yet it is certainly an institution of higher learning, where Marxism, the modern humanism, can be learned.

If the Communist University was to ask for money from its students, it would at once be suppressed as “bogus”. Likewise, if it tried to issue certificates, it would be crushed.

The dual, conflicted, condition of universities, including but not limited to the ones in South Africa, has been part of their nature from their beginning. What are they for? Who do they belong to? Who do they serve? This conflict is not over, and it will not be over until the free development of each has truly become the condition for the free development of all; until the university has been

universalised; and until the class struggle has been left behind. Until communism arrives, and for as long as they have to exist in class-divided society, universities will remain internally conflicted, showing two faces to the world: the face of control, and the face of freedom. The face of enlightenment, and the face of restriction.

## **Attached document**

The attached essay, “Education and State Power”, by the late Doctor [F.T. Mikhailov](#) (1930-2006), was sent to the Communist University as a contribution to our course on Education.

N F S Grundtvig associated sterility with Latin studies, and advocated “Schools for Life” as an antidote. Freire denounced what he called “necrophilia” – love of death – in education, and promoted to its contrary a liberating, dialogical “pedagogy of the oppressed”. Mikhailov argues that in the old Russia of the Tsarist autocracy, bureaucratic control over the universities was dominant. There was a brief period following the Great October Revolution when, as we might say (although he does not use these words) “a hundred flowers bloomed”. But after that, and from the late 1930s, bureaucracy ruled again, he says; and this was the time when he was growing up and becoming a senior academic in the Soviet Union, in the discipline of psychology, where he played a role in the revival of studies of the work of Lev Vygotsky.

Mikhailov reports that after the enthusiasm of Perestroika, and after the subsequent “fall” of the Soviet Union, the bureaucracy re-asserted itself in exactly the same way, remaining dominant until the time of his writing (2006).

Mikhailov nevertheless reports (e.g. on pages 5 to 7 in the attached scheme of printing) that there were many centres of enquiring, true scholarship at all times in the life of the Soviet Union, running within, as well as in parallel with, “the system”.

On the other hand, and substantiating his point about the bureaucracy surviving from the Tsarist period, Mikhailov writes (p.13, under “How the past overflows into the present”):

*“The most amusing thing is that in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century and very beginning of the twentieth century the clash between civil initiatives (and, consequently, of the corresponding forms civil society) and “state interests” took absolutely the same forms. The first citizens of Russia were fully aware of this. For purposes of illustration I shall cite models of the educational journalism of that time.”*

And Mikhailov proceeds with some long quotations about that period. But what does he mean by “civil initiatives”? Later, under “So who governs our education today?” on page 3 of the second booklet, Mikhailov says the following:

*“There is one simple and indisputable criterion of the real role that the community of scientists plays in the people’s life under the dominion of officialdom in a non-civic state. This criterion is the place of scientific people in the structure of the all-governing bureaucratic apparatus. If a place is most graciously established there for the community of scientists, then there can be no question of any innovatory self-government in the sphere of education!”*

It would be difficult for any free-thinking humanist not to sympathise with Dr Mikhailov’s essay, but what does he mean by a “non-civic state”, or a “civic” one for that matter?

It may be that there is a persistent and stifling blanket of bureaucracy in Russia, that did reassert itself within the Soviet Union, and which was not done away with by the “savage capitalism” of the 1990s in Russia. It may be that this bureaucracy remains entrenched up to this day, and particularly in education.

In South Africa, the academy remains quite uniformly conservative, even under a Communist minister. There is little or no room there for revolutionary ideas.

Mikhailov does not define his terms “civil initiatives”, or “civic state”, but he leaves us to imagine these things as constitutive of some kind of utopia, not very different from the South African conception of the “National Democratic Society”. The concept is without any class content, and

consequently, it lacks forward mobility. Thus, in the end, Mihhailov poses the anti-humanist trend of universities as a self-initiating curse, like a disease. Whereas the state does in fact serve somebody. It serves the ruling class. The ruling class in South Africa is a capitalist class.

But, universities can be places of learning, just as much as some ministers can be communists, even in these circumstances of capitalist class rule. Whether they are so, or not, can only be seen at the historical level, i.e. in practice.

Why was the Soviet Union unable to overcome bureaucracy? Mikhailov blames Stalin, and/or what he called “the retinue that manipulated the king”. This is a circular argument.

Perhaps it was having to do with the relations of production? In the Soviet Union, a job was still a job. Wages and salaries were paid as compensation for the labour power made available. The state was a capitalist. It expropriated surplus value. The dictatorship of the proletariat was not sufficient to destroy bourgeois relations of production, including the relations of production in education. The urgent, onward movement towards the withering away of the state, envisaged as a primary concern by Lenin in “The State and Revolution”, was blocked. With nowhere to go, the revolution had to mark time. This was the circumstance that made bureaucracy inevitable, and not the personality of Stalin.

If, instead of Stalin, Trotsky or Bukharin had become the first General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the same problem was going to be there, and the result was going to be in essence, the same: bureaucracy. In the written record, it is only Lenin who appears to have articulated this problem ([see “The State and Revolution”, 1917, Chapter 5](#)), but Lenin was already incapacitated by the early 1920s, long before he died, over 90 years ago, on January 21st, 1924.

Mikhailov too, fails to see the route of escape from bureaucracy. A “civic state”, lacking forward movement, would be as much of a haven for bureaucracy as the Soviet Union was, or even more so. This holds true in the realm of theory, and of education, as well.

The Communist University, free as it is of any financial or intellectual obligations, can be a model of new relations of production. The Communist University is not an amorphous “[crowdsource](#)”, however. It is not eclectic. The Communist University is partisan, edited and monitored. The Communist University is committed and is not class-neutral. It is not “civil society”, and it is not an NGO. The Communist University is an artefact. It is both the consequence and the occasion of collaboration between teachers and learners. But it is not neutral in the class struggle, like the late Mikhailov appears to have been. Because of what it is, and because of what it is not, the Communist University is able to hold out the prospect of forward movement towards

communism, which is the classless and therefore the stateless society.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-texts: [Education and State Power, Mikhailov, 2006.](#)
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here.](#)